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AUTHOR Grosenbaugh, Dick
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ABSTRACT

To work effectively with personnel in the news media, one needs to assist them in doing their job by getting accurate information to them (in plenty of time for their deadline) and in providing information about meetings (when they do not have a reporter to cover the event). Familiarity aids in communication with news media personnel so one should get to know each other's procedures and problems. When providing information, one should not try to conceal unfavorable information by telling untruths or by stalling. However, if a story appears that is blatantly false or in which a person is misquoted, one should not hesitate to call and ask that the error be corrected. One very important thing to remember is not to say anything one would not want printed in the paper or broadcast on radio or television. When talking to reporters over the telephone, assume that the conversation is being recorded. Other tips on how to deal with the media include answering a reporter's questions honestly, responding promptly, avoiding the use of jargon, never asking to see a story before it is published, taking notes of what is being said over the telephone, being available to reporters, and complimenting reporters when they have executed an exceptionally fine job. (Appendixes include tips on working with the news media and guidelines on the who, what, when, where, why, and how of a news story.) (HOD)

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WORKING WITH NEWS MEDIA

Presented at
Missouri State Council of
International Reading Association
Annual Spring Conference
The School of the Ozarks
Point Lookout, Missouri
March 26-27, 1982

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By

DICK GROSENBAUGH

Administrative Assistant
and Public Information
Springfield R-12 School District
Springfield, Missouri

March, 1982

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WORKING WITH NEWS MEDIA

Dick Grosenbaugh

Presented at
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Presenting ideas of reporting to the media with a group so diverse as this is a little difficult because *media* means different situations to all of us. In my case, *media* means reading morning, afternoon, and Sunday papers, viewing programs on three television stations, and listening to approximately ten radio stations. To persons in the St. Louis suburbs *media* may mean reading big city papers, watching and/or listening to radio and television which cannot always cover the suburbs, so the recipients may rely on community papers. In your case your source may be a weekly or daily newspaper and/or a radio or television station.

Regardless of the various definitions of the term *media*, there are some general facts everyone should know about media personnel (media). The relations you have with those persons in your town may depend upon how well you assist them in doing their job by getting accurate information to them (in plenty of time for their deadline) and in providing information about meetings (when they do not have a reporter to cover the event).

Get to know the persons with whom you will be working in the media and their interests and problems. Visit the paper,

radio station, or television studio and introduce yourself to the people you will have contact with if you do not already know them. Obtain a schedule of their deadlines, their requirements for submitted material, who to call if you have information, and the type of stories in which they are interested. In smaller communities this is probably not a problem as a result of the editor's belonging to the lodge, Lions Club, membership in the same church as you attend, or being your next door neighbor. In some instances, this could be less of a blessing than you would imagine--it may be easier to step on his toes.

As you visit with an editor and/or reporter, suggest that they visit you in return, see your classroom, observe what you are teaching, and meet other teachers. In other words, get to know each other's procedures and problems. Familiarity aids in communicating with news media personnel.

After you get to know the persons with whom you will be working, try to work with them on a *give and take* basis. You should be as open and as helpful to them on writing about the successful reading program as in helping them to understand declining test scores. The media cannot be a *fair weather friend* only and it would be unreasonable to expect them to be.

Do not try to conceal unfavorable information by telling untruths or by stalling. Provide the information requested in such a manner that you have the opportunity to explain the facts (preferably getting the information to the reporters before they

have an opportunity to ask you for it); then, take your chances. There are some less than knowledgeable or capable reporters who may turn out bad copy, many times it is because no one ever sat down and aided them in understanding what they were writing about.

When providing information, be fair and complete; encourage other persons to do so as well. If you inform the media about an event and it is postponed or cancelled, tell them; if it is a contest, be sure they receive the results. It is important that media receive complete and unbiased information.

One recommendation, which is easier to suggest than to accomplish, is for educators to be a little less sensitive to the media. If a story appears that is blatantly false or in which a person is misquoted, do not hesitate to call and ask that the error be corrected. Media personnel appreciate receiving correct information. It is best to ignore insignificant mistakes and responses of people who may have opinions that differ from educators'. Quite often, controversial issues or problems may be generated with media personnel by pursuing a small point rather than by leaving it to die a natural death. As an example, during a recent bus controversy, a group of parents were opposing a board of education action. The headline contained something to the effect that *volunteers join bus fight* and the reporter related how some people were coming forward to help in the disagreement. The coordinator of volunteer services read that headline and immediately came and requested that the newspaper

personnel be telephoned and told to retract the headline. To her *volunteers* meant the 500 people with whom she worked. The coordinator was informed that *volunteer* was a term in public domain and that we would become the laughing stock if the request were made. In essence, she probably was the only person who read the headline that particular way. If you ever have the desire to call and complain, sleep on it overnight. Chances are you will not feel as strongly about the issue the next day.

One very important thing to remember in dealing with any news media representative is to not say anything you would not want printed in the paper or broadcast on radio or television. Reporters are on the job at all times; and, unless they specifically agree that something will be *off the record*, consider it *on the record* and talk accordingly. Many reporters will no longer honor off the record conversations. Be certain you know their position before talking to reporters.

When talking to reporters over the telephone (especially those from radio) assume that your conversation is being recorded. The courteous thing for reporters to do is to ask if they may have your permission to record your responses; however, many reporters will tape everything that is said. So again, do not say anything you would not want aired on the radio.

From a number of sources, the following brief tips are recommended on how to deal with the media.

1. If you can answer a reporter's questions, do so honestly. If you do not have the information, tell them so. If you can refer them to someone who does know, do it.

2. Respond promptly. Few things irritate a reporter more than a lack of knowledge or concern about deadlines.

3. Avoid the use of educational jargon.

4. Never ask a reporter to show you his story before it is published. If you think parts need to be emphasized, say so in the interview. Almost all reporters will be sympathetic.

5. When talking to a reporter over the telephone, take notes of what you say, or better yet, have a tape record what you say, if it is in an area in which being misquoted could cause problems.

6. Be available to reporters. Let them know where you can be reached at all hours. Print that information on all news releases.

7. Compliment reporters when they have executed an exceptionally fine job. (Other items are included on the tip sheet, Appendix A.)

News releases are contained in Appendix B. Essentially, they may be interpreted to mean the following:

1. See that the media are informed of everything you do. It will increase the amount of publicity you will get.

2. Get the information to the media in plenty of time before the event or as soon as possible after it happens, while it is still timely.

3. If you have more than one medium, do not ignore the others. Do not play favorites among newspapers and/or radio or television stations. Give the same information to all.

4. Whenever you provide information to the media, make sure the information contains correct names, times, dates, amounts, etc.

5. Do not put a release date on any information unless there is a good reason (i.e., an Award to be presented at a certain time).

6. If media personnel come to cover an event, make them welcome and help them as much as you can (i.e., set up photographs, get copies of reports, identify people, provide seats up front, etc.).

If you consider media personnel as less than friendly, and at least not an enemy, but people who are doing an important job and desire to do it correctly with your help, you will establish and maintain good relations with media personnel and

your *reading program* and *school district* will benefit immensely.

Dick Grosenbaugh
Administrative Assistant
and Public Information
Springfield R-12 School District
Springfield, Missouri

March, 1982

APPENDIX A

WORKING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

1. Get to know the news media representatives (editors, reporters, photographers) personally; become acquainted with their requirements and deadlines.

2. Understand the operation and problems of the various news media. There are many things happening and a newsperson must decide, on order of merit and priority, what will be used. Often news department heads are so tied down, or shorthanded, they cannot send anyone to cover an event. Be patient, and do not forget them next time you have a news item.

3. Send as many releases as you wish and telephone reminders as often as you wish, but do not pressure any news media person into providing publicity.

4. It is often a *red flag* to members of the news media if they are constantly reminded as to what a competing news media has provided in an effort to solicit coverage.

5. Send out information on anything and everything. You would be surprised as to the kind of feature ideas some newsmen can come up with from small and apparently insignificant news releases.

6. Publicity should not stop when a meeting or other event begins. News media personnel are interested in what occurred at an event. If they cannot provide a reporter,

they would appreciate and expect a call from the person with accurate information.

7. Be certain to inform media personnel of a scheduled event that has been cancelled, and the reason for the cancellation.

8. You cannot get complete coverage for activities by giving an item only to the newspaper (unless that is your sole medium). Send items to radio and television stations as well.

9. Be fair in your dealings with members of the press. Expect coverage of both the *good* and the *bad*. Longitudinally, you will come out ahead.

10. Do not be overly sensitive about those things written about schools. Exclusive of obvious mistruths or errors, most things that seem to raise your ire will be better left past rather than stirred up by complaint; remain calm and complacent.

11. Too often program administrators wish to choose the time for publicity, especially when the project is fully completed. Preliminary publicity about a program enhances the likelihood that it will get public attention when it is complete.

12. Avoid educational jargon when reporting to media personnel.

13. Provide the reporter your home telephone number and get

theirs. These numbers are useful when unexpected news breaks during off-duty hours.

14. When a reporter covers an event help them get the story; provide copies of reports, identify people, provide reporters with front row seating or head table honors.

15. If you can answer reporters' questions in your area of expertise, do so, honestly. But do not guess. If you do not have the answers, tell them you will find out and call them soon.

16. Respond promptly. Few things irritate reporters more than a lack of understanding or appreciation of deadlines.

17. When you have responded to an inquiry that is substantive, immediately notify others who may be involved. When reporters call you, they may just have completed a call to other staff members or they may plan to call others after talking to you. Apparent contradictions in information may be the focus of a story unless controversies are cleared up.

18. When discussing news with reporters, always put facts in perspective and provide as much background information as possible.

19. When giving reporters impromptu statements on the telephone, (especially concerning a controversial issue) jot down what

you say (or use a recorder). The notation will come in handy if a second reporter calls about the same issue or if you are misquoted.

20. All reports and surveys are public property. You may not withhold such data when they are requested--even though you believe the reporter is going to use the material to impair a program. You do not have to release rough drafts, working papers, preliminary figures, or notes.

21. Remember that when talking with reporters you are always *on the record* even during informal or chance meetings. Avoid casual comments or *off the record* remarks unless you specify first that they are not for publication. Be sure that the reporter will accept *off the record* information before volunteering it.

22. Do not try to suppress unfavorable news. Any attempt to do so usually results in a story's receiving greater prominence.

23. Do not assume that reporters will be impressed with your position or title. He is used to dealing with public officials at high levels and will consider a condescending attitude a shortcoming on your part or intimidating gesture . . .be careful.

24. Never ask reporters to show you their article before it is published. If you think parts need emphasis, say so in the interview. Almost all reporters will be sympathetic to

your needs. But you must remember that reporters' first responsibility is not to program objectives. . .it is to the general public and the publishers.

25. Invite reporters to advise to the staff and board about the district's press relations and news coverage. They are bound to give better coverage if you follow their suggestions.

26. Compliment reporters when they have performed exceptionally well and write letters to their editors praising the articles.

APPENDIX B

WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, AND HOW

The five W's and an H are used by people in the news business to indicate the information that should be in a complete news story. But they can also be used as questions directed toward the correct procedures for publicity to be used by organizations and agencies in the community.

WHY

Why should you publicize the activities of your organization?

Basically, there are several reasons. One is to inform the members of your group about activities pertaining to them. Another is to let the general public know about the activities and achievements of the group.

It can also help to publicize a problem or project that the organization is interested in helping.

WHO

Who should you contact?

To get the maximum effect from any publicity, it should be directed to all news media and not to just one. This will give more chances for exposure and an opportunity to reach different groups of people.

And it will also prevent any hard feelings between your group and any member of the news media which is constantly ignored.

Not all media can give the same time or space to a news item. And the impact of the items in the various media are not always equal.

Whereas the newspaper has more space, it can print more of the details of an event and long lists of names or figures.

Television and radio are more limited in the time they can devote to news. But, often, this type of exposure is more effective than the printed page in getting across an idea or event.

All news editors have to take close looks at the total news picture and rank things according to importance. Some days, organizational news items might not be used. But this is no reason to give up supplying news releases to any one media.

You will be surprised at the amount and type of coverage your activities might receive if you cover all news media with your releases (actually, it is not that hard to make copies of a release).

HOW

How should you go about getting publicity?

The best way is to write up a release on just about anything and everything your agency or organization is doing and to see that it gets to the news media while it is still news, not a week later.

The releases should be typewritten on full 8½ x 11 sheets of paper (odd sizes tend to get lost) and either mail or delivered. If there is more than one page in a release, title and number each page and staple them together.

Information can also be called in. This is preferred if the event is of immediate importance, such as some important decision made at a meeting or the presentation of an award.

Do not, however, try to call in a two page news release. It just takes too long to copy it over the phone and with that much information there is more chance for error.

Try and find out the busy times for the news media and avoid calling with a story during those times unless it is extremely newsworthy and might warrant space in the edition or newscast being worked on.

WHAT

What should be in a news release?

As we said, each news release should contain:

WHAT has happened (or is going to happen).

WHEN the event will (or did) take place with the time, day and date (i.e., Thursday, November 16).

WHO was (or is) involved including the phonetic spelling of hard to pronounce names, if possible.

WHERE the event was (or is to be) held including building and room.

WHY the event is to be held or the decision to be made, giving background information if possible.

HOW a decision was made (by board or membership) or a meeting conducted (panel, lecture, etc.).

On all news stories it is advisable to put the name and phone number of someone who can be contacted for further information.

This is valuable when a reporter wants to check details, get further information or make arrangements for more elaborate coverage.

News releases need not be written in perfect journalistic style because they will be rewritten before they are used. But it is important that all the necessary information be included and that it is *correct*.

Do not put a release date on a news release unless there is a good reason (i.e., it is on an award to be presented at a certain time). Not all news media honor release dates and will use a story to jump ahead of the competition if it is important.

Newspapers and television stations make extensive use of visuals with stories, and appreciate any help they can get in finding and setting up pictures.

Newspapers use still photographs and often prefer the subject be arranged so that identification can be made of those in the photographs. They also like the identification with the

picture. Most often they will prefer to take their own pictures but can use other photographs if they are of good quality.

Television stations prefer to have color videotapes whenever possible. In most cases, they will have to take these themselves because few people have videotape equipment. The television station can also use 35mm color slides (of good quality) provided to them. They also use 16mm film.

There is a difference between the two media. The newspaper likes to set up many of its pictures for easy identification purposes whereas the television cameraman often prefers to capture the action just as it happens.

This difference should be taken into account by any publicity chairman in assisting the photographers.

WHEN

When should news items be sent?

If a release is about something that is to happen, it can be sent as far ahead of the event as desired. It is best if it can be sent at least a week ahead. This allows it to be placed in a file of future events for scheduling purposes.

Advance notice is necessary if there is to be actual news coverage of the event when it happens. Most news media are limited by a small staff and a busy schedule. It is extremely difficult to arrange for coverage of events which are called into the newsroom just several hours before they are to happen.

If the release is on something that has happened, it should be given to the news room as soon as possible. It is best if it can be called in. If not, it should be written up as soon as possible. If it can not be reported immediately after an evening meeting, for instance, it should be in the newsroom in the morning.

There is a difference in deadlines between the news media. The newspaper publishes two editions a day and therefore has two deadlines. Television stations usually have about four news casts and therefore have that many deadlines. Radio stations differ but some have news every hour and will then have a great many deadlines.

It would be well to find out from each media a list of deadlines so that news releases can be delivered on time.

WHERE

News releases from the school system go through the office of the Administrative Assistant and Public Information. Most of those are mailed ahead of time to be released at a certain time. Other releases, that have timely material, are hand carried to the news media.

For general information, however, it is best to know where and how to deliver releases.

If mailed, the envelopes should be addressed to the News Editor, Newsroom or News Department so that it will go directly there and not have to filter down administrative channels.

If hand delivered, it is best to go to the receptionist's desk and she will either accept the item or give directions to the correct office.

WINNING WAYS

These final W's are thrown in to cover some assorted hints on dealing with any news agency.

1. Send as many releases as you want and call with reminders as often as you want but do not try and pressure any news media into providing publicity. This often is the quickest way to get left out.

2. It is often a "red flag" to members of the news media to constantly remind them what a competing news media has done in an effort to solicit coverage.

3. Try and understand the operation and problems of the various news media. There are many things happening and a newsman must decide, on order of merit, what will be used. Often a news department is so tied down it cannot send anyone to cover an event. Be patient, and do not forget them next time you have a news item.

4. Visit or call the head of a news department (but not

during the busy period). He will be happy to talk to you and tell you about what his organization can use in the way of publicity. And you will know with whom you are dealing in the future.

5. Send out releases on anything and everything. You would be surprised what kind of feature ideas some newsmen can come up with from small, apparently insignificant news releases.

6. Publicity should not stop when a meeting or other event gets underway. The news media is interested in what went on at an event and if they cannot send a reporter would appreciate, and should expect, a call from the publicity chairman or an officer reporting what occurred. In some cases, many things occur which were not expected that would make good news. *Do not forget to call with results.*

7. And remember, you cannot get publicity from all news media by giving an item only to the newspaper. Few stations clip and use newspaper items. *They cannot use your news if they do not have it.*

8. Here are some things that might make:

   Annual meeting
   Program for the year
   Meeting dates

Membership of committees

How funds are used

Sponsorships

Individual member's achievements

Significant talks and speeches

Activities good for pictures

New building plans, construction and occupancy

Participation in celebrations or other public events

Election of officers

Installation of officers

Social events

Money raising drive or campaigns

Holiday observances

Organization honors

Important actions of committees

Visiting speakers and celebrities.

A SAMPLE NEWS RELEASE

From: Bob Edwards
Publicity Chairman
831-2881

Date: March 19, 1982
or
For Release Immediately

The Optimist Clubs of Springfield will hold their annual joint meeting Friday, March 19, at 7:30 p.m., in the Mavajo Room at the Arrowhead Restaurant, 1900 North Glenstone.

Participating will be representatives of the five Optimist Clubs in the city (Northside, Westside, Breakfast, Springfield and Downtown Breakfast).

Presiding over the meeting will be Mel Rasmutin (Razz-mew-ton), Lieutenant Governor for Zone Four of Optimist International.

Purpose of the meeting is to discuss joint plans of the clubs throughout the next year.

All Optimist Clubs now sponsor separate projects for young boys in the community and the clubs together maintain a Youth Director to coordinate all such projects.

--0-- (indicates end of story)

(or MORE if additional pages are included)